

Organic Food Commission Workgroup
October 17, 2002
Ellensburg, Washington

Members present: Harold Ostenson, Bill Dean, Ray Fuller, Scott Leach, Dain Craver, Eric Strandberg, Jeff Herman, Alec McErlich, Welcome Sauer, Jim McFerson, Jim Hazen

Others in attendance: Charles Pomianek, Wenatchee Valley Traffic Association; Lynn G. Blair, Washington Wheat Commission; David Granatstein, WSU; Dave Case, organic grower; Evan Sheffels, WA state Senate Committee Services and Ag Committee staff council; LaVerne Bergstrom, WA Apple Commission; Phil Unterschuetz, Organic Advisory Board;

Review of notes from September

1. Evaluated Procedures that could be used to establish a commission: New RCW must be established to form an Organic Commodities Commission.
2. Generated a list of questions to be answered if legislation went forward
3. Suggested a commission interest group develop a strategic plan or business plan.
4. Evaluate current commission plans that benefit organic producers
5. Examine the distinct needs of the organic food industry
6. Recommendations provided regarding legislation for establishing an organic food commission by December 15.

Review of draft Legislative report

1. Review Table of contents of entire report
2. Review Executive Summary:

Question on point #2: What percentage of farmers *by acreage* support forming a commission? That will have to be looked up.

Welcome Sauer points out an error in the assessment fees for the Apple Commission: It is actually around \$20.9 to \$24.1 million, not \$38 million as stated. Jim McFerson points out similar discrepancy with Tree Fruit Research Commission, the figure there looks too high as well.

Harold Ostenson and Ray Fuller have draft recommendations to submit to the group. Prepared by a group of mostly apple growers and given to Jim Hazen and Dr. Jay Brunner for input. Recommendations gave Jim and Dr. Brunner insight into perspectives and research potentials, but was written by Ray and the group.

Draft proposal would work within the commissions and act more to oversee organics and give those not currently in commissions a chance for representation. The cost of overhead would be less because they would not be involved on a daily basis. The bulk of the money would remain within the commissions, with a portion going toward organic commissions within the existing structure.

Draft proposal would ensure priorities regarding organics don't get buried in commission priorities. It would also be a way to ensure that organics has a consistent voice within the existing commissions.

Concerns include underfunding and how effective a committee would be if there was not enough money to support it. Spreading the dollars too thin may result in a system that is cumbersome and ineffective. Members of the organic community can run for the board of commissions to ensure representation.

Umbrella commission vs. individual commodity commissions. An umbrella commission would not ensure each commodity gets equal representation.

Welcome Sauer has a prepared document titled “How Does the Washington Apple Commission Benefit Organic Apple Growers?” Forming voluntary associations may be the way for organic farmers to go above and beyond what commissions can do.

Quantifying the amount of money commissions spend on organic research and marketing is a necessary step in order to ensure organic farmers are represented in commissions.

The Wheat Commission opposed creating a separate commission. Research budget goes mostly to WSU and none of that research done is exclusively on conventional cropping. Special areas of marketing under the wheat commission are open to proposals from organic growers, although that has never happened.

The possibility of writing legislation to force commissions to address issues facing organic growers may be another avenue to pursue.

Organics as a way of life. Is the commission marketing crops in this way? Current advertising does not tell the consumer why they should be paying more for their food. Farmers want to put a face to the product because that’s what consumers look for. The commission cannot do that without alienating their main membership. To advertise what the organic farmers want to advertise cannot be done unless they are on their own.

Is there the possibility for an organic advertising commission? Can the organic industry mesh with OTA, Tilth or the NOP for advertising?

It is divisive to pit growing systems against each other. If a separate commission is formed, WSDA needs to look at where the base of their support lies and how they will handle people who do not support a separate commission.

Kathy Kravit-Smith clarified that WSDA is only writing a report to the legislature, not forming commissions. WSDA remains neutral, that any new commodity must come from the industry, not the agency.

The survey respondents that rejected the idea of an organic commission recognize that the industry is in a transition toward being commodified. Growers who stand against that are being left behind. Those people who reacted to the survey reject this and hold values such as biodiversity, health, etc. These people are the backbone of organics from the very start. Recognizing the difference in the philosophies of the growing systems is a step in addressing the separate needs of the organic industry.

The importance of doing two things was pointed out: 1. Look beyond apples and 2. Carefully think about what to do, as this decision will affect the growing organic industry into the future. Revisit the survey and make clear treefruit industry versus those not currently in a commission.

Comments from the audience:

Diane Dempster, Charlie’s Produce: There are more people in the industry that would like to be involved in the process. Marketing must be separate because the organic consumers buy organic apples for a different reason than just buying an apple. She supports a commission, trade association or other standard that would make it so the commission had to do certain things to support organic products.

Charlie Pome, Wenatchee Valley Traffic Assoc: Has seen a significant transformation in the apple commission the last 3 to 4 years. He sees split operations as having concerns about competing

assessments. If the survey was structured with a marketing plan and a specific cost per unit to support the commission, the findings may have been different. The idea is to find out at what level of cost would the farmer support an organic commission?